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# THE LEMON TREE: MY TREE OF LIFE

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THE LEMON TREE:  
MY TREE OF LIFE

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing:  
Poetry

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by  
Meghan Elizabeth McCarthy  
June 2014

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MY TREE OF LIFE

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June 2014

Approved by:

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## ABSTRACT

*The Lemon Tree* is a collection of poems that arose from my attempt to capture memories of influential experiences in growing up. The poems are written in prose blocks and move in and out of childlike and adult sensibilities, creating the disillusion of time and memory. The poems themselves are comments on the unreliability and limited scope of memory and compare memory to dreams. This suggests that time moves more fluidly than the waking world accepts. Through looking back, through prisms, the speaker remembers experiences that impacted her development as we follow her on a journey to coming-of-age. *The Lemon Tree* grapples with becoming and expressing her female fertility and growth as a woman. The speaker constantly searches for love in places of religion, marriage, romantic relationships and friendships. At times, the poems decide what love is by what it *isn't*. The act of creating itself was the aim of the manuscript more than the finished project. Some remembrances are intentionally left unclear and messy like wild weeds. The poems are confessional and bear resemblances to a memoir in a lyrical fashion. *The Lemon Tree* focuses on the processes of life: both the barren and the abundance of fruit, light and dark, winter and summer. The speaker tries to resolve the binaries of trauma and of love and in the process, finds her identity as seen through the symbol of *The Lemon Tree*, which ultimately becomes her personal tree of life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate this manuscript to my family, for loving me through every season. To Mama, for putting flowers on my dresser and encouraging me to write. To Dad, for teaching me lessons in unconditional love. Thanks to all of my siblings: Jamie, Jenni, Jackie, Bridgett, Nikki, Brett, Ryan, and Krista, for raising me. I am so proud to be your sister. Thank you Dima, for being my lemon tree. I love all of you.

To my MFA family for watering me into a growing poet and my full self. Thank you to my Professors: Chad Sweeney for reminding me that poetry is the vein straight to my heart and that the rain forest could wait until after my MFA. Julie Paegle, for modeling grace in writing and in living. Juan Delgado for showing kindness like you would a daughter. Thank you infinitely to my cohort: Larry, Tristan, Kelly, Isaac and Ryan. For the laughter, the tears. All of it. I love you.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:  
THE LEMON TREE: MY TREE OF LIFE

In this home, there are lemons in the backyard. In the old house, there were men in black masks, burglars raiding our neighbors houses, so we moved. At least that's how I remember it. My father gifted all of his kids with our own trees to plant. Some thrived, others stuttered and appeared to die. Growing up, I got my heels muddy, wanted nothing more than to explore the yard. I saw my back yard as the whole world. I caught lizards rode horses heard fighting experienced love, love for family, love for friends, for animals for dark, for light. I was born the youngest of a family of eight. I was born the only child of my parents. I combined two families. Whom could understand me? Whom couldn't I understand? And whom could I love? In the same way I explored the back yard, I began to explore the world as though it were an extension of my home. I learned from the song of scarab beetles and from my brave brother jumping off of the pier in summer. I was never afraid of experience. The Lemon Tree is an homage to my youth, a youth that I now recognize as fleeting. It is a celebration of my female fertility, my rage, of how to identify with the world and find love. It is trying to remember why I am me and why I am here.

I began journaling at age seven, adamant to create my life story in language. The language of the back yard evolved to detail the world as it expanded through the safe sandboxes of high school and college into the



unknown beyond. The language of this back yard began with my personal tree of life—my lemon tree. I see a lemon tree and think of my sister's longing for fruit on her tree and relate that to her need to escape the "laws that laid heavy in our walls." I see a scarab beetle in the "mouth of a widening rose" and see Egyptian prophecy, a relationship ending, a new chapter waiting to unfold. Journaling is recording life so I won't forget, but poetry is my language for the world, my tool to discover and express the unknown parts of myself in uncharted waters, to explore deeper within myself. In her essay "Poems Are Not Luxuries," Audre Lorde describes giving names to the depth within ourselves as "illumination" and "poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience" (282-3). The experiences rose to the surface. Written as an elegy to the house I grew up in, *The Lemon Tree* grows from the soil of memory and a thirst for understanding the nuances and paradoxes of growing toward love.

In the last week I would ever live in my childhood home, with my parents in Florida, I was able to sit with the house alone and remember. This project is my efforts to try to make sense of the world, this house, this yard, this lemon tree, to find my own language for my experience with my world. As Lorde asserts, as woman, as poet, "poetry is not a luxury" but a "vital necessity of our existence" that arises, "carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives" (283). Though it isn't easy to see one's life from a critical distance, my best friend Krista and I did just that as we lay in the sun all day in the back yard and reflected, remembering the way we grew up, watching the wild life that fluttered through our

neighborhoods often unnoticed, our eyes locked on the lemon tree. We talked about the tree from all angles: the act of planting her, her leaves, at first desolate, then green for years at a time. We talked of how full of fruit she became. We admired her peels, talked of our mothers and their love for us, of how much we didn't see or understand when we were kids. It was my turning inward—from this scene of the yard toward internal questions of who am I as seen through the lemon tree. The following day I opened my lap top and began writing things I remembered, scenes I had nearly forgotten, experiences I wanted to forget. I was not aware of any order to this inquiry, no intention, just a blinking document, ripe with memory. I had been under the challenging reins of an MFA, a level of performance that made me aware of where my poetic lines fall, of my voice or my tone. In the empty house, I wrote a map for myself to read, no audience but the Self, a sentimental good bye to my home. I did not plan to show these poems to anyone—did not consider their literary value as “good” or “bad” but as experience necessary to record.

The symbolism of lemons transformed into an image of my emotional experiences that demanded to be addressed to myself as a poet. They weren't pieces of art, but messy weeds, photographs kept in a drawer. But I feel with my whole heart that it was necessary to write. In *Letters to a Young Poet* Rainer Maria Rilke writes, “A work of art is good if it has risen out of necessity. That is the only way we can judge it” (9). This book rose out of necessity. It has been the first poetry collection I've ever written and its poems are among the most

personal I have shared. This manuscript has been one well of experience finally ripened into lemons for me to grab, open, and taste. My lemon tree, simple and quiet in my back yard, became my tree of life. Writing this, I swam in her branches, reliving. This collection is me looking back, remembering, letting go in order to move forward. This act of revisitation is necessary to my spiritual survival.

The collection reflects in pools of water, my Self as woman and as poet growing from darkness. Being exposed to women writers has given me strength to write my own stories, in conversation with theirs. I have always been obsessed with the ocean but lived inland, so I grew up playing water polo and swimming. I would settle for pools. A classmate lent me his copy of *Chronology of Water*, a memoir by Lydia Yuknavitch. This book is a dive into a non-fiction tale that was raw, real, yet with poetic language. Yuknavitch gives a middle finger to punctuation. She talks about the elation and also the discipline of swimming, of growing up in a chaotic environment and she does not hold back. I was inspired. When I came up for air, I felt suddenly that it was okay to say “this happened.” That it was okay to write without fear and to not feel forced into a structure, okay to be a woman still becoming. I realized, me and my house?—we have something to say. The first wave of poems were written in a single sitting and did not move chronologically, but rather like water.

Yuknavitch writes, “All the events in my life swim in and out between each other. Without chronology. Like in dreams. So if I am thinking of a memory there

is no linear sense” (Yuknavitch). I felt the world as she did. She gave me permission to write freely with no judgment of my own work. I could make my language obscure, if I wanted. I could speak openly about love, death and loss. I wrote first about my family buying a bigger home in a new town and from there, my mind jumped from experience to experience, from childhood to present, from three years ago to ten. The language slips in and out of the past to present sensibilities. “Language is a metaphor for experience,” continues Yuknavitch, “It’s as arbitrary as the mass of chaotic images we call memory—but we can put it into lines to narrativize over fear.” In writing these poems, I have overcome my fear of memories by controlling them with narration. I have dug into my remembrances of growing up to make sense of chaos. I have been freed by their revelation on the page. The Lemon Tree releases issues of emotional burden, what we keep quiet inside. From all those times when I had “swallowed too many lemons,” when the world was sharp and loud, creativity exploded. In the stories of overcoming inner pain, I found the beauty in confronting what is darkest about myself.

This collection gathers polaroids of my life, written in prose blocks. The form is clean and square, each containing painful memories or stories of coming of age, of deep learning or of unsolvable mystery. In first drafts, I hardly capitalized or punctuated anything—no commas to slow me down, no periods to separate thoughts. Everything spilled, near formless in context, but I wrote it in a neat box. The structure, I believe, is my mind’s effort to take what is fluid and

borderless and to resolve it into a composed form. I didn't think much about what I was writing, I just wrote. In Russell Edson's essay "Portrait of the Writer as a Fat Man: Some Subjective Ideas on the Care and Feeding of Prose Poems," he describes the process of writing prose poems as creating "as rapidly as possible" in order to not "lose its believability, its special reality ... because the writing of a prose poem is more of an experience than a labor toward a product" (103). With this collection, I am trying, through the prose form, to catch memory like the water I swam in, longed for, the type of formlessness I crave as a young poet.

In keeping with the borderless nature of experience, there are no titles to these poems. The reader enters a sentence that is not capitalized and leaves the poem with no punctuation. The resulting effect is a single sixty-five page poem, because life is fluid, no instant separate from another; all flowing like water, in and out of each other. The world moves in cycles, there isn't a file we have that stores experiences in a neat order. There is no way to access this hypothetical filing cabinet with factual clarity. I can only reflect within my limited vantage point, which makes backward glance feel like a dream.

I believe that poetry, in its truest form, is dreaming. The symbols we see in dreams, like poetry, are closer to the truth than facts are. In my poem "[dad knocked on the door]," I explore a time where I am going through an emotional battle and cannot connect with my mother. She comes into my room and says, "I had a dream you were drowning" and I feel her soften toward me. In this memory all I see is my mother looking up and trying to recall the haze of her

dream. “You were beneath me, in a boat, my baby ... I reached underneath but I couldn’t pull you up.” And I witness my mother in a new light because I see the struggle to express her deepest feelings. The poem continues, “Mother with her love so strong for us only dreams could speak.” Dreams use symbols intuitively what we strain to express in language. Her mind put into an image she could grasp, what was happening to her daughter. I was never under a boat but that’s how we felt. The poem finishes with “Only dreams could catch the light right of why I couldn’t come up for air.” This collection tries to remember, even as it stutters in the process.

The Lemon Tree explores the faultiness of memory. In the poem “there were men in black masks,” I detail my account of when my family decided we’d move to lemon trees. I was only six years old, so I describe the criminals as “men in black masks” who “carried things like metal, like death.” I have only a childlike recollection of the experience. Of our relocation, all I recall is my mother painting the walls “greens and tans” to cover stale wall paper. My remembrance differs greatly from the rest of my family. In the poem I ask, “would my father remember it this way?” or would he remember the paper work? The job he had slipping from him? Would he remember the stress of the move? The hope of new soil? The elation?

The Lemon Tree inquires: why are some memories just beneath the surface demanding attention and others are forgotten? Why does one individual remember a scene so vividly in her mind and the other person doesn’t remember

at all? I explore these questions in a poem in which I was thirteen and my mother, full of anger, tears my hair out of my head. Then I was “dropped at school.” I did not want to look at this memory. I did not want to remember my mother in this way, but the memory lay beneath the surface, waiting to be revealed in this poem. “I don’t recall our morning difference, she doesn’t remember this day.” When I try to remember, it feels hazy, as though it didn’t happen. My new friend, Krista, sat next to me and felt my heart swell. Without words she guided me into the girl’s bathroom and untangled my hair. This was ten years ago. This stranger became my best friend, my sister, a main character in my life story and in *The Lemon Tree*. My poetry selected this memory and even when I wrote it down, it didn’t feel real in the factual sense. The poem asks, “Did I dream her weaving her fingers through my tangles in the girl’s bathroom?” This moment, so long ago, showed me the rage in my mother that, so young, I didn’t understand. Yet now, a decade later, I realize her sadness was not my fault but one that all women share. I later came to understand the extent to which all women suffer in their domestic lives. The memory lay beneath the surface to illustrate that as a woman, I was trying to understand who I was in relationship to my mother.

The *Lemon Tree* expresses a woman’s rage and longing, but also unity among women. Sandra Gilbert identifies this as a “striving for self-knowledge” in her essay “My Name is Darkness” (120). I learned to know myself through the loving-kindness of other women. When we’re older, I call Krista for solace after a

romantic relationship ends traumatically. In my poem “[for thirty dollars we are given goggles],” she tells me “you are a rainbow fish.” In our own intimate language, developed since we were kids, she tells me I am beautiful. As a girl, I constantly tried to identify myself through the patriarchal structure of God-as-Man religion and sought validation through men’s approval. Here was my best friend praising my “hidden, eccentric” side, my fish scales, glimmering in the sea, beautiful (119). The fish that freely float in water throughout the collection serve as symbols to my connection with the subconscious, the Self I kept hidden, the Self my friend encouraged me to embrace. The poem continues, “She doesn’t recall saying this. I will never forget with beamed teeth.” Krista’s words have been powerful. They stick in my memory and whisper to me that I am worth something and that I have family outside my home. There are days in our lives that pass by unrecorded. Some days, when later reflected upon, shape us and show us who we are, or who we don’t want to be. Poetry helps me conclude that according to my vantage point, I am a rainbow fish.

The subjectivity of each memory frames each poem differently in the collection. I acknowledge that I am only able to see what lives inside of my frame, my window. When I learn of my mother’s first marriage as a teenager in my poem, “[a walking stick a yellow lab],” I recognize that she has a “a life I wouldn’t know.” It was perhaps the first recognition that she is not just my mother but a woman who was once my age, who has a well of fears and experiences she draws from, that I will never access. I ask, “What can we see that lies outside the



frame?” How much can we really know? How much of memory is fluid? The frame symbol is present again in the poem “[I swam in pools].” Here, I notice the mountains holding me in a snap shot of my life. In this snapshot, water polo practice every morning meant carrying jugs on “my head to make my legs ready for serious serious battle” but also studying and watching “birds catching their hands to air, circling in the frame of San Bernardino sunrise, their orbs holding me” and together, the bird and I live inside my memory, the full picture of what I felt happened. The frame is repeated again in the poem “[descend into dark wood]” where a Yosemite “silent skyscape” is experienced as a memory in the process of recording into “a breathing pulsing frame.” In this way, I can take what is two dimensional on the page and make what’s happening within come alive. Within the poem-as-frame I am able to see life from a distance, this solitude I’ve grown to love. It is this separation, this tool to lift myself “above the frame of the house where I learned how to sharpen nails to be heard” that allows me to see the beauty and pain as a process of becoming.

In similar fashion, the body itself becomes a frame. In the poem “[we are taught this world is not]” I ask “Why do we let our frame suffer for trapped spirit?” Which might also be expressed “as why do we see ourselves separate from our bodies? From our God, our Lemon Tree?” I see the frame of a body as associated with death, a disconnect from spirit. At the literal cusp of death, my father’s body becomes “Dad’s frame [that] jumped three feet off the ground eight times,” and in the death of my granddad, his longing for his wife is described

thus: “frame fled leaving him with a house he didn’t want without her.” The poem attempts to show that my grand dad did not want to envision a life in his bodily frame without his wife. The Lemon Tree is an effort to connect the body and spirit through the device of framing stories. It is my attempt to reconcile our disconnect from our world and assert that we are not separate from the processes of our environment and experiences. Our memories become shared. The frame throughout the lemon trees shows our limitation with our human world view into the fallibility and subjective limitations of memory.

Throughout the collection I write in and out of a childlike perspective, attempting to return to the age before memory of experience. This is exemplified in “Krista hates birds” where I remember trying to summon my escaped pet bird from the street:

Who left the front door open? I called to her. My family staring up at trees and calling. Whistling. Singing the songs she knew. Her breast was white and cheeks clown orange. All I could see were two small suns profiling me: a hysterical girl shouting for her bird.

Here, I pan out and write from an adult sensibility:

Was that me standing and calling sobbing in sandals singing whistling where is that girl now?

In the final gesture I return to a solemn child’s perspective

When night fell she took flight and flew toward our open door. The bird that broke away lost fire orange to yellow face that day she settled behind plastic and metal. I don't remember putting her back in the cage

This bird later becomes the metaphor for my family, all in our quests to leave the house, the lemon trees. I compare the bird to my mother in "[we are taught this world is not our own]" by showing "[s]uitcases wheeled by the door," asking: "Was my mother the bird that wished for trees cross the street?" and relating to her: "I'd run away and come back, I had no bag to pack." In the bird's desire to escape and return, I see myself becoming.

The Lemon Tree is a coming-of-age story in which I portray my moral and psychological transition from childhood to adulthood. My poems serve as narratives of experience and as teachers. In the poem "my brother," my brother and I go into the attic. I do not remember much of the scene, just that my brother was going to take down fiber glass I described naively as "pink blankets" from the attic. "That's all I remember. He might have been ten or thirteen, me six or nine." Our ages are irrelevant. Before I touched the dangerous fiberglass, that's how my innocent mind saw it, as sweet as "fake snow on a ceramic pond." The poem doesn't describe my cut hand. I don't even remember anyone bandaging me. But this experience stuck with me. This parable that my unconscious memory offered up was a lesson. The poem finishes with "Experience, the only teacher," as I would never know what to touch, what not to touch until I felt the sharp shards of

splintered glass. I identify this poem as a coming-of-age anecdote that illustrates the speaker's first-remembered painful experiences from her world.

I was a relatively solitary child awash in an enormous pulse of energy. I watched life closely, yet kept myself protected, at a distance. I have both loved and despised this critical distance. This collection has shown me that being the youngest, I only had my green lens to apply to the abundance of life lived before me; that adults, too, can have a disconnect with life; and that they don't know all the answers. Rilke asks the young poet, still becoming: "why not then continue to look upon it all as a child would, as if you were looking at something unfamiliar, out of the depths of your own world?" (55-6). My world is expressed through the lemon tree, as the center of the yard, my upbringing, the tree of life. I stumble through my existence trying to adjust my eyes to align with "a child's wise not-understanding" in order to not cling to "scorn" as adults who do not understand their coming-of-age experience (56). I want to focus on the love in the family, but the bitter bite of lemons can take hold. To thwart this bitterness, I try to angle the camera from the waist of the tree "and look lens toward wisps of clouds." "Come to God as a child," asks the lemon tree. Sing of experience, but also of love.

Like memory, itself, *The Lemon Tree* develops multi-dimensionally from differing angles, with gaps. Another example of the gaps of memory is shown in a poem "[to feel something]." This poem traces a relationship with dramatic highs and lows. Here and elsewhere in *The Lemon Tree*, I try to make sense of this relationship with its unanswered questions, extremes of love and grief. I want to

grow from darkness. In the poem, I recall the innocence of my boyfriend's little sister whose "dark hair matted from play all afternoon." The recollection jumps, and in "the same memory," the boy breaks a phone and punches a car—we are up on the roof "eyes mirroring fire work" where "we made love up there and I lost a sandal." The poem explores the question of love and hate through a distorted remembrance. How could it be both light and dark? But it is always both, and so my memories overlap and layer themselves, causing confusion, or perhaps I should say paradox.

The Lemon Tree tries to peel back the layers of these personal experiences, resolving the conflict between my own confused romance with that of my parents' complicated relationship which serves as my only model for romantic love. In my poem "[we are trained this world is not our own]," I attempt to articulate my young understanding of love. Again, a mixed memory: going to church with my parents who "fought all the way" with no one hearing me tasting "salt from the back seat." The poem explains that my parents' parents also knew fricative marriages: "my parents poor with no memory of love from barren parents fought all the way to church." Which raises the prospect that I might continue this heritage of struggling marriages—how do I break the cycle? By putting these memories into language, I make them visible, and gain a degree of objectivity. The visibility and objectivity enable me to steer my life in a different direction, toward love. Much of growing up and making one's identity is what one decides to unlearn. Religion showed my parents the 'right' way to be married: go to

church and stay together, despite the lack of a consistently lovingly bonded spirit. As a child, I asked, isn't God love? I was confused. The speaker, trying to make sense of love, attempts to return to a childlike innocence. The poem reminds her "Matryoshka, there's a child within you. Come to God as a child." This shows the speaker's heart and mind grappling with what the world teaches. In the final movement of the poem, I imaginatively reflect on knocking on my brother's door "until we sit on jungle gym swings, stare at a dense moon glowing banana smile in the sky." This didn't happen in fact, but the poem is still true as a flood of different experiences with my brother's moon-myth-making and my parents' inner conflict. In my mythic version, my brother points to sky and says, "[T]hat's god's thumbnail." The speaker, drenched in innocence concludes "God was further on these nights. I think he was in someone else's kitchen." This poem records the moon's "glow over noise," which implies a reaching for the magic of love while only hearing static and conflict. The poem then layers the adult sensibility asking the serious question, "Is this what walls are supposed to hold?" and "Is what we are shown what we are destined for?"—layering my parents' memories of childhood with my own as if our family mistakes keep repeating. I'm trying to focus on the moon instead of the conflict on the ground floor. These poems are my sincere attempts to heal my family's history in order to paint a new future for myself in the apparition of the moon, beyond the reach of petty, mundane conflict.

Throughout, *The Lemon Tree* explores these layers of memory. The lemons in their kindness, open the past, dispell confusion, and show me what to learn and unlearn. The tricky part is identifying thoughts and feelings we don't have language for. Saying sad and happy is like using the same two colors to paint the world. Life is more than yellow and green. The Lemon Tree is my attempt to say the unsayable. For example, in my poem "I first saw God when I was asleep," I recount in a dream-poetic-unfiltered state: "I know god now, I found the answer Sully and I one I don't know where a pen is but I will remember." I had an experience, in a stupor, and thought I would be able to capture it in a morning coherence. To translate such an experience is like catching water with a net. Dream states and experiences of feeling the oneness of life are ineffable, but through poetry I try through images and symbols to express these feelings. Philosopher Alan Watts describes that "the task and delight of a poetry is to say what cannot be said, to eff the ineffable, and to unscrew the inscrutable." My art is my struggle to understand the world and my thirst to describe it. The poem articulates the limit of language with its ending, "when I wake when I woke up I forgot who i was"—showing that through poetry I realize the difficulty in expression and translating what is felt in the heart. Expression, like memory, is saying what can only be felt. The solid "I" fades into an "i," a "humbling revelation" that my experiences are fluid waves of memory and experience, a spirit that cannot be framed by the body.

Another example of trying to explain the inexplicable through image is shown in my poem “[house],” in which I explore the house I grew up in, again employing that critical, objective and imaginative distance. The poem opens with the sun setting behind the mountain; the pink “hue deepens us” and “whispers motors past another.” Together, these create a scene in which the remnants of light and heat from the sun fade as sleeping drivers go about their domestic life. The reader moves onto the driveway and sees that “the car door is left open” and that “groceries [are] bagged on the floor in the kitchen.” Within this image, I am attempting to show conflict, a struggle so strong that the family cannot bring the groceries inside. The tension in water building “behind the valve” and the “master bedroom door is shut” suggests conflict on the brink of eruption and yet a masking of marital pain; a refusal to remain open to love. When writing a poem like this, I don’t know what the images are telling me until I unlock them like a code on a page. I write into self-knowledge. The ideas and revelations form within myself as the words do on the page. Richard Wilbur’s essay “Poetry and Happiness” explains that, as poets, “[w]e are happy when for everything inside of us there is a corresponding something outside us” (480). I was in an unhappy state when recording this emotional and physically desolate replica of my home, but when I could articulate through image what I could feel, “happy” best describes the release of energy after finishing the poem. In the final movement of the poem an owl appears, “circling, waiting for dark.” I correlate her outer presence with my inner conflict and thus try to “read her like braille.” What I find



is that she describes change and the ability to see what others can't in dark places. The poem continues, "we see her by sound, the way she takes shape on the telephone post" and we feel her presence, thus gathering our own experience with her. The owl is, at once me, my mother behind the door, and/or God. At the same time, she witnesses and watches over us showing that there is an objective wisdom in seeing this house that was once built on love and hope for a better life. This same house now becomes swallowed by something hateful. The poem ironically asserts that "what doesn't have a spirit lives on" implying that the house's structure—(beams and boards and dripping kitchen sinks)—will continue after our spirits are gone. Of course, these things are less significant than the mood, the emotional weather lived within the walls. The collection weaves poems that illustrate my parents' hard work on the structure on the house, neglecting to highlight love for each other inside of the walls. The building becomes the sole focus of their love and thus the house itself begins to wither: "even the weeds have browned, stopped pushing life through cement." My father with so much will to make the land habitable for our family built the house "with his fist, this house that swells in her mouth, in his chest." Perhaps, this violent force wreaked upon nature made my mother feel trapped within its walls. The poem's final gesture describes the house as a "manufacture where love used to be, or didn't. Nobody can remember." The problem with the past, as expressed in *The Lemon Tree*, is that we are all telling our stories with our limited perspectives, applying our loving

or loveless moods, stuttering or mute rather than articulating what is most vital to living: love.

Understanding love in its many forms is perhaps the greatest obsession in these poems. Within the collection, the kitchen becomes a symbol of domestic love. In the poem “[a walking stick a yellow lab]” I explore first love and compare my romance with my mother’s first romantic experience. The boy in the poem is the kind example of what love is, the green spring. The poem counsels the young couple to “turn off headlights and believe in moonglow,” to turn off the engine and “drink and swallow stars.” This innocent relationship begins when the speaker calls him crying with her “parents fighting in the kitchen, again.” The kitchen is where there should be physical and emotional nourishment, but here there is none. The pot is empty. The boy helps the speaker onto “the back of the mare he raised” and allows her to “gallop in his back yard, her hooves happy kicking up dirt.” The image of a horse suggests freedom, the symbol central to the region of my neighborhood. The boy doesn’t engage sexually beyond innocent boundaries, stopping at stroking the tops of her hips: “that’s as much as I let him,” she remembers, “that’s as far as he tried.” The speaker, made wary by negative examples of domestic love, will not allow the boy to fully engage romantically.

This theme of a refusal of intimacy following hurt is repeated throughout The Lemon Tree. The speaker decides to end the “greenlove” when she learns that her mother divorced her first-love-turned-first-husband, turned memory of “a

life [she] wouldn't know." This suggests that we learn by example, repeating each other's memories. As in "[house]" which ends with dusk, foreshadowing the end of the innocent phase of romance. The kids climb onto the roof and witness the neighbor shooting her horses. This sudden jolt of death depicts how abruptly the spirit can be stifled, how quickly love can end. The speaker finishes with, "Later, my mother told us, that she shot them because she couldn't feed them, anymore." This comment suggests that economic well-being is tied to the health of family dynamics—our free spirits, our joys, our chance at believing in love, all grounded in the reality of expenses. The neighbor could not provide food for her horses, or in the context of my family history, spiritual nourishment that we should be able to find in the cupboards of our kitchens.

The Lemon Tree also illuminates glimpses of love in the house. The poem, "[it was night and the sky went black]" renders a scene where the brother shows his bravery for the first time. All of our friends, and the ocean itself, "egged brother he would jump from the pier and swim to shore." This was the first time our family—our friends who became extended family—experienced our inner-circle of heroism. When the brother recalls this story after he moves to Nebraska, he links the memory to "the pool in the summer with volleyball nets smiles our friends contained in the water father happy he let us play lemonade in the kitchen." The pool embraced all of us, our pleasure while the lemons were abundant and made sweet on the counter, "our home the place for purple." This memory sometimes slips away, until someone in our family recovers it, until it is

recorded. We once had good memories in the kitchen, ones that should outweigh the dark ones.

A later poem, “[my father’s heart is big],” details my father’s serious heart attack. In the kitchen where my mother stops “slicing avocados for husband’s after-practice snack, love unspoken, seen in slices of green.” Because of the trauma, my mother remembered that she loved my father—at least she had at some point. This line suggests that when something critical suddenly happens, one is forced to stop and re-evaluate relationships with loved ones. Love is hard to express in words, perhaps ineffable, but there is love present in the slices of avocado, in my mother’s quiet act of making her husband guacamole, his favorite. In this moment, life’s spinning top freezes, and we see that she could become a widow in the kitchen. My poems ask over and over: does anyone else see this?

I have, through poetry, discovered my voice, my vantage point, how I witness the world. My characters and myself included come of age. Most importantly, I discover my view poetically. In poem “[Mom taught me how to paint at ten],” my mother shows me how to paint a scene of an ocean using water colors. I idolize the painting and my “mother, the painter, showing me the way.” In the poem, I “recovered a paint brush” and start exploring the world through color. Even in a dark period, the images reveal “that the insides of me still made of sun” with sloppy designs of “butterflies, green, sunflowers, peace dove, hippy child, sad girl, tree hugger,” and the paint heals me. This poem shows that through the

very act of expression I am able to “warm up” and lead my brother to start painting as well. In the final movement of the poem I stand, years later, on a beach in Costa Rica and discover the same “shore scene [I had] conjured at ten, the same sway of tree, rolls of waves” and in this moment I realize the power of creation and the power of our efforts to shape a desired future. “I manifested this human with so much power in my skin my palms this purple soft machine.” I owe poetry my existence. I owe the simple act of creating to discovering who I am and what I am capable of becoming. This art shakes off the rust and webs inside my spirit.

The Lemon Tree is an attempt to reconcile my ideals of love with the realities of love in the lives of individuals. It is my belief that God is love. If God is love, then my job as a poet is to decipher what love is and what it isn't. This collection urgently searches for an understanding of love and where to find it without losing one's independence and equanimity in the process. The quest for love begins on the ground floor. The poems ask: is there love in the trees? Is there love between my parents? Is there a way I can love the whole world but also one partner? This project stirred a well of living memories within me. The process was heavy as the tree limbs of a “lemon tree full of lemons.” The emotional resonance of each piece made me initially reluctant to leap back into the often-repressed content of memory. But like a lemon tree, what is most difficult to bear creates the most growth. This collection of poems has given me a

map of my emotional growth as person and as poet. My life in a living polaroid,  
naked and exposed as a lemon tree under rain. This is my sapling.

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APPENDIX  
THE LEMON TREE